

The Art of Evaluation. A Handbook for Educators and Trainers. Tara Fenwick and Jim Parsons. Toronto, ON: Thompson Educational Publishing, 2000, 248 pages.

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Tara Fenwick and Jim Parsons have created a manual that gives the adult educator specific strategies to use in designing instruments of assessment. They provide checklists, sample evaluation forms, and rating scales that can be used as they are or modified to suit an individual's own context and preference. The manual is a handy and useful reference for beginning educators and trainers of adults. It might also be useful for the experienced adult educator who is looking for new strategies and perspectives in doing assessment.

The focus of the manual is on the teacher's design of learning experiences; it is not intended to be used by program developers. Program development raises different assessment questions than those raised by the individual educator, and there is only brief mention of program evaluation in the handbook.

The manual starts at the beginning of developing assessment; it raises basic questions regarding the purposes of evaluation, the role of a teacher's philosophy in evaluation, and what should be evaluated in adult education. In the first five chapters the authors' also examine fundamental issues regarding evaluation, including the dilemma of adults evaluating other adults, the involvement of adults in their assessment, and anxiety in adult learners. In Chapters 6 through 10, the authors' examine different evaluation approaches for evaluating conceptual attainment and growth, technical skills, relational skills, and performance. They present a strong argument in these chapters for evaluation to be authentic, that is, for it to represent how learning really takes place. For example, they argue that because the most significant adult learning takes time and "goes down deep" (p. 77), evaluation strategies need to take time and go down deep. Evaluation, they argue, needs to reflect the learners' learning reality, their intrinsic motivation, the messiness of learning, and the dynamic and connection-making way that is adult learning. In Chapters 11 through 13 the authors focus on learner self-assessment and continual assessment as an ongoing, integral part of adult education programs. In the final two chapters of the book the authors' suggest that adult educators need to reflect on dilemmas and anomalies found in their own educational practices, because these offer, they suggest, the "richest growth opportunities for us as educators" (p. 143). For example, they propose that adult educators can make evaluation truly learner-centered by leading their students to think of evaluation as being

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"ongoing, continuous and integrated, [so that] learning and teaching become shared activities of teamwork and community" (p. 122).

Fenwick and Parsons use four text forms, each of which the adult educator will find useful. The most useful by far are the descriptions of specific evaluation strategies that are found throughout each chapter and in their Toolboxes section (pp. 149-211). They are clear in describing advantages and disadvantages of many of these strategies, as well as the considerations that must accompany the use of many of them. The second text form is the authors' personalized commentary on the strategies. These commentaries take different forms, from suggested alternatives to the strategy being commented on, to advice for the adult educator to consider when engaging in the evaluation strategy at hand. The third text form is references to current thinking and practices by adult educators in the area of adult learning. These are presented both in narrative and in description. For the reader a sense of trustworthiness is engendered in the manual by reading, for example, what a practicing educator does about evaluating learners in her or his teacher education class (p. 127), or in reading what Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, and Smith (1994) and others do today regarding their use of authentic evaluation strategies and tools for building learning communities (p. 104). The fourth text form is a persuasive and cogent defense of having formative assessment integrated meaningfully into the design and implementation of learning experiences. The authors here are reflecting what adult educators have known and practiced since the early 1980s, that learning is a social construct, that knowledge is a social construction. The sociocultural context of learning is more than just significant in teaching and learning: it is how learning occurs. The authors effectively move the reader around and through this most postmodern of all educational notions. Sprinkled throughout the manual are reminders to "build a comfortable, encouraging learning environment" (p. 61); or to think of curriculum as "a journey that both learner and teacher take together" (p. 75). Although these notions are hardly earth-shattering, their presence throughout the manual reinforces the contemporary view that the meaning of anything, including evaluation, is always made in a context, that no meaning resides in decontextualized "facts."

There is good news and there is bad news for the user of this manual. The good news outweighs the bad, but first the bad news. The authors do not clearly explain the three most fundamental notions underlying their manual: assessment, evaluation, and measurement. The ambiguity created by this lack of definition is more than just annoying; it is indicative of the oft-heard claim that adult education lacks a specific language on which it should organize itself, that it is a discipline still searching for a discourse through which it can legitimize itself. The solution to this first problem is simple: use precise definition. The rest is good news. The authors' understanding of dynamic, authentic evaluation (assessment) reflects the current widespread understanding of the centrality of brain-based learning to all teaching and learning activities. This understanding is being enhanced through the influence of writers like Caine and Caine (1997) and Goleman (1998). Fenwick and Parsons are "singing out of the same hymnal" regarding the need to design educational activities (includ-

ing assessment activities) that reduce learners' anxiety and promote coherence and connectedness in the minds of the learner. They have a "practitioner's" understanding of learning theory, and make effective, albeit general, reference to what is known about learning and the design and evaluation of learning activities. They remind the reader that skills learned in one context may be inaccessible in another (p. 59), and for educators to apply to evaluation their understanding that the more active a learner is during a teaching-learning act, the more likely it is that insight will occur (p. 73).

This manual is for the educator who says, "Just tell me what to do." However, it is also for the educator who says, "I am ready to make evaluation more important in my work." The manual is for the educator who is willing to change evaluation practices, beginning with a thorough review of the core assumptions, theories, and beliefs that undergird evaluation practice; and who is then willing to make evaluation more central to the design of his or her intentional learning experiences. Fenwick and Parson's manual is a concrete expression of the widespread sentiment that the stakes in education have become too high, that evaluating adults for their memorization skills, or training adults to perform routinized learned skills, are as doomed as the dinosaur. They know that the workforce requires inferential thinkers, self-directed lifelong learners who can handle ambiguity and complexity never before experienced in the workforce. Old and tired behavioristic ways of evaluating learning just do not ring true for today's adult learner. For the business or private agency searching for the right worker the stakes are also high. They need to hire individuals who have been educated by experiences, including evaluation experiences, that have affirmed individual meaning-making abilities, which are developed when evaluation includes the individual's meaning-making.

In *Alice in Wonderland*, Alice finds herself in Wonderland for the first time. She asks the cat, "Which way ought I go from here?" The cat replies, "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to." "I don't much care where," says Alice. "Then it doesn't matter which way you go," replies the cat. In this manual the adult educator has clear directions of which way to go. But more important, the manual clearly describes where that direction should take the adult educator, a direction toward the design and implementation of evaluation experiences that is summed up in Fenwick's and Parson's own words: "Our philosophy is that, with adult learners, the goal is to make evaluation an important thread woven throughout learning, developing continuous self-assessment in learners as a way of life-long learning" (p. 20).

References

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